

Report on the Confluence Project from the Eau Claire Landmarks Commission

The primary responsibility of the Eau Claire Landmarks Commission (ECLC), as outlined in the 2005 Eau Claire Comprehensive Plan, is to “identify, protect, and preserve Eau Claire’s resources, which reflect distinctive elements of the City’s cultural, social, economic, political, historical, and architectural heritage in order to enhance the quality of life and foster pride and knowledge about Eau Claire’s past.” Section 2.65 of the Code of Ordinances for the City of Eau Claire lays out the purpose and functions of the ECLC. It also states that the “protection, enhancement, perpetuation and use of improvements of special character or special historical interest... is a public necessity and is required in the interest...of the people.”

This report has been prepared to help interested parties understand the historical and architectural significance of properties immediately affected by the Confluence Project development proposal. It is also intended to provide a response to the City Council’s resolution dated 25 September 2012 requesting information on the status of the properties within the Confluence National Register District. It was developed using Eau Claire city directories, research found at the Chippewa Valley Museum, and research included in the Confluence Commercial Historic District nomination form to the National Register of Historic Places.

All photographs featured in this paper are courtesy of Mark Fey.

National Register of Historic Places Designations

The Confluence Project proposes to remove seven of 14 buildings located within the Confluence Commercial Historic District (CCHD) (see attached map, page 7). This district is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. One of the seven buildings slated to be razed is also listed independently on the National Register of Historic Places. This building is at 6 South Barstow, also referred to as the “Kline Building.” For a complete list of all the properties within this historic district, see Appendix A, page 8.

The National Register of Historic Places is the official Federal list of districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects significant in American history, architecture, archeology, engineering, and culture. To be considered eligible based on significance in American history, a property must be at least 50 years old, look much the way it did in the past, and associated with events, activities, or developments that were important in the past. A property is considered architecturally significant if it is at least 50 years old; retains the location, design, setting, materials, and workmanship of the original structure; and embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction.

Eligibility is determined first at the state level, then at the national level. Only a State Historic Preservation Office can nominate a property to the National Register of Historic Places. Private individuals and organizations, local governments, and American Indian tribes often initiate this process and prepare the necessary documentation. A professional review board in each state considers each property proposed for listing and makes a recommendation on its eligibility. Then the National Register of Historic Places program reviews the nomination materials and makes a final decision in regards to whether or not a property is significant enough to be listed.

Historical & Architectural Significance of National Register Historic Places #07001047: Confluence Commercial Historic District (CCHD)

The ECLC applied for National Register of Historic Places status for the CCHD because the district has excellent intact examples of several architectural styles representative of the historic role and development of this area from the post-Civil War up until the Great Depression. In fact, it has the highest concentration of architecturally significant buildings in Eau Claire's downtown commercial district. The construction dates of structure within this district range from 1861-1936.

Among the variety of buildings in this district are a hotel that housed 19th century German immigrants (the Kneer House, 18-30 South Barstow Street), a movie house that entertained Eau Claire residents in the Roaring Twenties (State Theatre, 312 Eau Claire St.), and even a financial institution that collapsed during the Great Depression (Drummond-Cameron building, 17-21 South Barstow). The Confluence Commercial Historic District, *as a whole*, provides a historic and architectural overview of commercial changes in downtown Eau Claire. On a more emotional level, the entire district is a tangible reminder of the challenges experienced by residents of Eau Claire through the boom and bust of the lumber era up through the economic upheavals of the Great Depression.

Historical & Architectural Significance of Individual Properties on the west side of the first block of South Barstow between the Eau Claire River and Eau Claire Street.

Buildings on the West side of South Barstow:

Eau Claire Gas Light Co. (1907), 2 South Barstow.

Contributing Building (#4 on map) to National Register of Historic Places #07001047, CCHD:

Listed as letter e in the Confluence Project data summary prepared for Haymarket Concepts, LLC

Historical

In its first 50 years, this building primarily functioned as the Eau Claire's local utility company: Eau Claire Gas Light Company (1907-1914), which became Wisconsin-Minnesota Light and Power Company (1914-1923), and finally, Northern States Power (1923-1958). Between 1907-1920, a succession of small businesses and business colleges also rented space on upper floors. After NSP moved to a new location across the Eau Claire River, the building served as an entertainment center — first for Golden Q. Inc. Billiards (1964-1971), and then the Adult Entertainment Center (1978-1997).

The two lives of the building portray a modernizing city and a modern city with social challenges. Demand for gas, and then electricity, increased, as artificial lighting became the norm in businesses, homes, public buildings, and even streets lamps. The 20th century brought laborsaving home appliances and factory equipment that used electricity, not waterpower. This all increased the work and importance of the power company and it played a pivotal role in the growth of the city. The building's second life as a place for entertainment often associated with vice and the seedier side of life does have historic roots in the downtown. Saloons and brothels, crime and gambling, did exist in downtown Eau Claire from the very beginning and though these are not topics that paint a pretty picture, they help tell the whole story of downtown Eau Claire.



Architectural

It is one of seven buildings in the district constructed in a Commercial Vernacular style, and it contributes to the overall architectural integrity of the historic district. This style of building features dark-colored brick facades, uniform door and window placement and minimal architectural ornamentation, all of which suggest an emphasis on low-cost design, availability of building material, and functionality over style.

Kline's Department Store, 6 South Barstow

National Register of Historic Places #84003669 (#5 on map):

Listed as letter f in the Confluence Project data summary prepared for Haymarket Concepts, LLC



Historical

The building was designed by Charles Pear, an architect who practiced in Eau Claire from 1923-29, and built by Hoeppner-Bartlett company in 1925. The building's first tenant and occupant was Kline's Department Store (1926 – c. 1928), but the store was soon replaced by another clothing store — The Fashion (1929-1972). For fifty years, The Fashion served as an anchor retailer in downtown Eau Claire. In 1950, the building was enlarged by 4,000 square feet by expanding into the north unit of the neighboring Derge Building (see below). During its peak in the 1950s and 1960s, the store employed 40 people and occupied all three floors.

Architectural

This is the most architecturally distinctive building of all the buildings proposed to be razed by the Confluence Project. It was an infill between the Derge Building (below) and the Eau Claire Gas Light Co. building (above). It is one of only two buildings in downtown of Eau Claire that show early 20th century architecture. The other is the two-story State Theatre at 312 Eau Claire Street. This building blends Neo-Gothic, Mediterranean Revival, and Art Deco Styles popular in the early modern period.

There have been alterations to the building, though not significant enough to prevent it from being listed in 1984 as an individual property on the National Register of Historic Places. Interior historic restoration has uncovered several original features and décor.

Derge Building, 16 South Barstow

Contributing Building (#6 on map) to National Register of Historic Places #07001047, CCHD:

Listed as letter g in the Confluence Project data summary prepared for Haymarket Concepts, LLC



Historical

In 1875, German immigrant Julius Derge began a cigar manufacturing company in Eau Claire. At that time, German immigrants dominated the cigar industry, here and elsewhere. Four years later, Derge married Anna Kneer, daughter of Matthias Kneer (see Kneer House below). In 1897, Derge razed the Kneer House livery building and built a new structure for his cigar company at 16 South Barstow. There cigars were made until 1947. Early on, the cigar company occupied the entire building, but changes in the cigar industry gradually reduced the company's footprint to one floor, then one room.

Frank Derge, Julius Derge's son, joined his father in the cigar business around the turn of the 20th century, and took the company over in the 1920s. The Derges rented space to other tenants when their cigar company no longer needed both stories. One notable tenant was the Savoy Café. In 1928, The Fashion store opened on the first level of the Derge Building. By the following year, it had moved next door to 6 South Barstow to begin its fifty-year stay at that address.

Architectural

This two-story brick commercial structure is more ornate than many commercial buildings of its vintage and shows decorative elements of the late Victorian period. Although the street level façade has been altered, the second story façade has retained its original architectural elements.

Kneer House, 18-28 S. Barstow

Contributing Building (#7 on map) to National Register of Historic Places #07001047, CCHD:

Listed as letter h in the Confluence Project data summary prepared for Haymarket Concepts, LLC

Historical

A section of this collection of buildings is the oldest structure in downtown Eau Claire. The building in its entirety most clearly shows the growth of Eau Claire during the 19th century.



In 1861, Matthias Kneer, one of the earliest German immigrants to Eau Claire, built a hotel, calling it the Chippewa House. Within a decade, he had renamed the building the Kneer House. Kneer expanded his hotel four times between 1861 and 1881, and then extensively remodeled it in 1889. The existing upper level façade of the current structure reflects the 1889 re-model.

The building served as a popular hotel and restaurant from 1861-1920. Single men and families who did not own homes often stayed long-term in hotels. In fact, there is evidence that downtown jeweler Jules Ducommen resided at Kneer House for at least ten years. Like all hotels of the era, the Kneer House provided meals, laundry for an extra fee, and a place to stable horses. Meals and laundry were particularly important in an era when men often worked 12-hour days and laundry and meal preparation were much more labor-intensive. Kneer's German ancestry attracted other German residents and the Kneer House played a prominent role in the celebration and promotion of German culture. The building says much about the German heritage of our community.

A variety of merchants occupied the building after the Kneer family sold it in 1920. For a short period (1923-1928), the First Wisconsin Land Mortgage Company occupied the second floor. This company sold cutover logging lands in northern Wisconsin, often to families from Eastern Europe looking for places to farm, a reminder that immigration continues to re-shape the Chippewa Valley.

Architectural

The existing upper level façade dates to the 1889 renovation and has remained mostly intact. The building is constructed in a Commercial Italianate style commonly seen in downtown commercial buildings of the same utility, design, and vintage as the Kneer House. The lower level façade, like

the previous two buildings, has seen significant changes, including ornamental brickwork that appears to date from the early to mid-20th century. All of the original first floor windows and doors have been replaced and reshaped.

Buildings on the North Side of Eau Claire Street

Erity's Market, 210 Eau Claire Street

Contributing Building (#10 on map) to National Register of Historic Places #07001047, CCHD:

Believed to be included in letter a in the Confluence Project data summary prepared for Haymarket Concepts, LLC

Historical

Built about 1925, the building began as a market followed by 38 years of retail (sporting goods then H & L Men's shop). From 1978-2000 it was home to Zip Print.



Architectural

This building is also one of the seven buildings in the district constructed in a Commercial Vernacular style and contributes to the overall architectural integrity of the district.

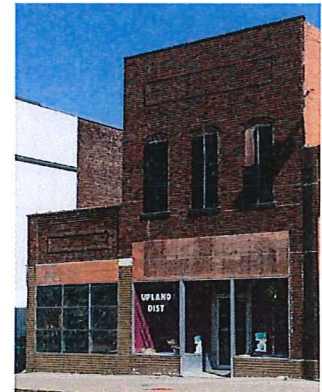
Becker and Carlson Buildings, 208 Eau Claire Street

Contributing Building (#8 & 9 on map) to National Register of Historic Places #07001047, CCHD:

Listed as letter a in the Confluence Project data summary prepared for Haymarket Concepts, LLC

Historical

These two buildings were built separately but were joined in 1966 when the H & L Men's Shop expanded. The older, two-story building was constructed in 1875 and originally served as shop for cabinet & furniture maker John W. Becker, a German immigrant. Becker also ran an undertaking business, a common extension for furniture makers. After Becker's death in 1884, the building became a saloon with apartments on the upper floor. In 1884, there were 21 saloons south of the Eau Claire River in downtown Eau Claire. In the entire city, there were 83 saloons. It remained a saloon for 45 years, a fact that underscores the historic importance of taverns and the alcohol industry within the community.



The building went from saloon to waffle house in 1929, and then turned to retail in 1946. H & L Men's shop opened in the two-story building in 1946, expanded to 210 Eau Claire Street in 1963, then expanded into the one-store building in 1966.

The smaller, one-story building to the west was built about 1936 and served a variety of retail operations until it became a part of the H & L Men's shop in 1966.

Architectural

These two buildings are also among the seven buildings in the district constructed in a Commercial Vernacular style and contribute to the overall architectural integrity of the district.

Concerns

The 2005 City of Eau Claire Comprehensive Plan begins its section on Historic Preservation by describing the significance of the confluence of the Eau Claire and Chippewa Rivers as the site where Eau Claire began, where it transformed from an “undisturbed wilderness to a bustling community of more than sixty thousand people.” The plan goes on to say that preservation is important because “older buildings help define communities and their unique personalities.... Many of the unique cultural features, which distinguish one community from another, have been lost due to the economic expediency of standardization. The intangible qualities of our older buildings and neighborhoods have been a resource that is important to preserve and protect.”

Removal of buildings within the CCHD would fundamentally change the character of the entire historic district, and ultimately, the downtown. As noted earlier, this district has the highest concentration and variety of commercial buildings of any area in downtown Eau Claire. This uniqueness and its location at the starting point of Eau Claire’s downtown requires that extra consideration be given to any physical alteration of the district. Removing half of the historic district could potentially displace the remaining buildings. The buildings on the east side of Barstow Street, though architecturally significant, would be at risk of becoming buildings without a neighborhood, or, “just old buildings.” In other words, the east and west sides of Barstow Street work together to create a historical context for all of the buildings.

The Confluence Project overview prepared by the Haymarket Concepts, LLC states that “The developer does not feel that any of the buildings are worthy of local Landmark status.” This opinion is not supported by the Eau Claire Landmarks Commission nor by the Wisconsin Historic Preservation Office (HPO) nor by the National Register of Historic Places program. The ECLC proposed listing the CCHD on the National Register of Historic Places because it did consider the properties to be significant. The Wisconsin HPO reviewed the documentation gathered by the ECLC, determined that the materials presented a compelling case for the significance of the CCHD, and nominated the district to the National Register of Historic Places. The National Register of Historic Places program, the highest level of review, agreed with the nomination and listed it on its national register. The Commission does consider these buildings to be locally significant and eligible for local designation as the basic review criteria is the same for the local program as that used by the Wisconsin Historical Society for the National Register of Historic Places.

Finally, it is important to consider historic preservation as one component of sustainable development. Projects that meet our present needs should also provide for the needs of future generations. We should consider the project’s impact on the social and cultural environments as well as on the local economy and the physical environment.